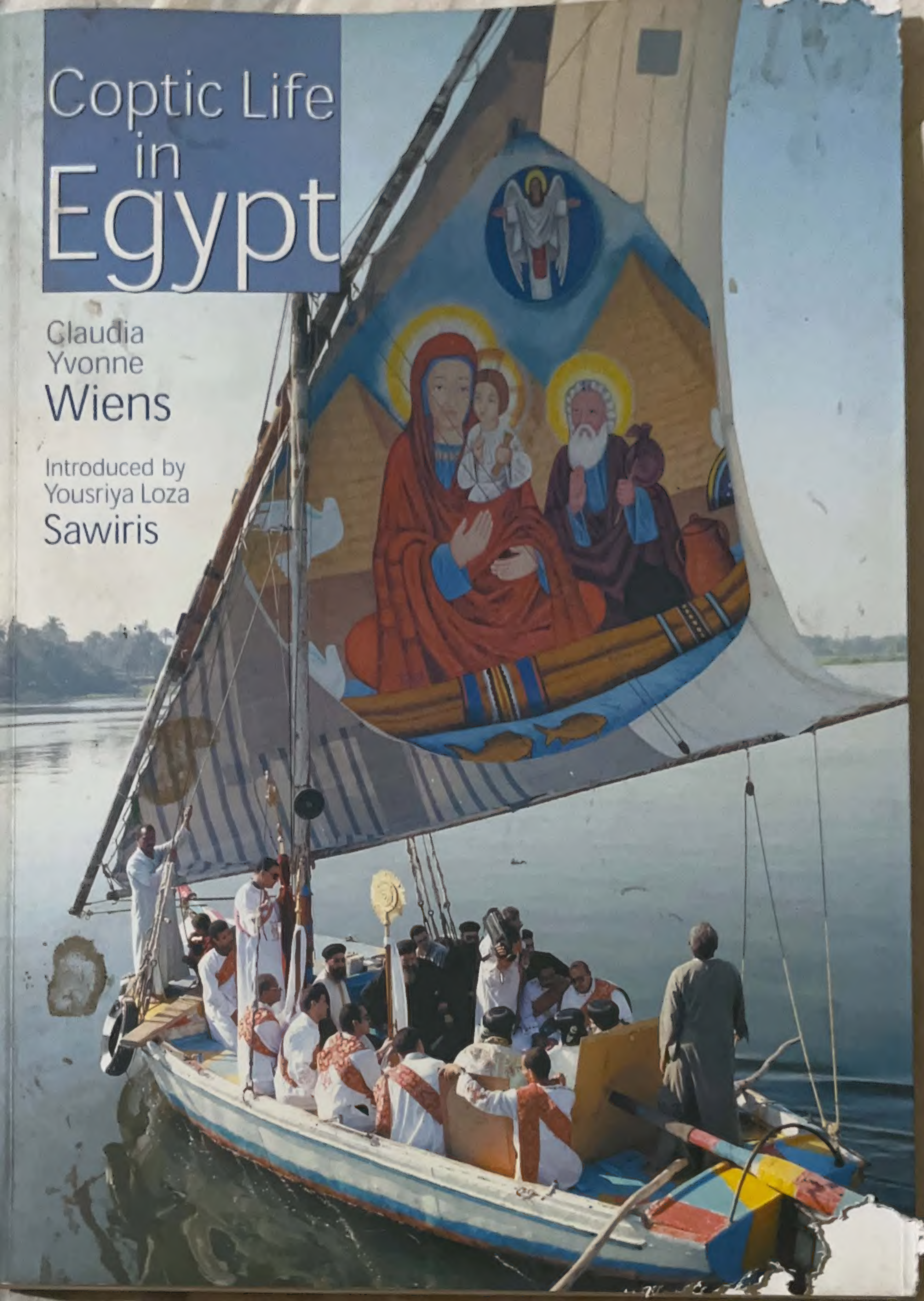


Coptic Life in Egypt

Claudia
Yvonne
Wiens

Introduced by
Yousriya Loza
Sawiris



Coptic Life in Egypt

While a number of photographic books on Egypt's Christians have concentrated on the artistic and architectural heritage of the

Copts, *Coptic Life in Egypt* focuses on the religious traditions and social life of the ordinary people, revealing a little-known side of the lived religion of a Christian community largely unfamiliar to the Western world. The book is divided into seven chapters; each begins with a short introductory text giving the background on customs, traditions, and beliefs captured so vividly in the photographs that follow. People in Egypt like to display their religious beliefs: in every store, juice bar, ironing shop, or commercial establishment run by Copts, tokens of Christianity are on exhibit. And for many Copts, their religion is a very large part of their lives, finding expression, for example, in their passionate attendance at *mulids* and pilgrimages, which draw thousands of people. *Mulids* are one of the best examples of how social life is combined with religious life, how religious devotion is fused with fun and joy: a family may have a baby baptized and then enjoy a ride on one of the merry-go-rounds; they may make supplications to a saint then have a picnic or enjoy a cotton candy. This vibrant book of lively photographs is a window onto a colorful and intriguing world.

Coptic Life
in
Egypt

Coptic Life in Egypt

Claudia
Yvonne
Wiens

Introduced by
Yousriya Loza Sawiris

The American University in Cairo Press
Cairo New York



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by the generous sponsorship of
Naguib Sawiris

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Introduction

by Yousriya Loza Sawiris

The Copts, the native Christians of Egypt, regard their country as especially blessed, being the only place outside the Holy Land where Jesus Christ set foot, when the Holy Family spent three years here to escape the persecution of Herod. And the Copts proudly trace their faith and their church to the arrival at Alexandria of St. Mark the Apostle, who brought with him firsthand the mass celebrated by Christ—this mass, translated into Coptic, was later collected and organized into the first recorded liturgy by Cyril I, the 24th patriarch of the Coptic Church. The faith of the early Coptic martyrs was an inspiration to Christians everywhere. Egypt was also the birthplace of Christian monasticism, following the example of St. Antony in the Eastern Desert in the fourth century, and the Catechetical School of Alexandria was a leading light in the development of thought and the defense of faith in the early Christian church. Today's Copts remain firm in their faith and proud of their heritage, which has made such vital contributions to Christianity as a whole.

This book describes and illustrates in words and pictures the life of the Copts in Egypt from a foreign visitor's point of view: how they practice their religion, how they keep old traditions alive, and how this is reflected in their everyday life, in such forms as *mulids*—celebrations of the birthdays or martyrdom of saints that are attended by thousands of people, both Christian and Muslim. The photographer also examines the life of Egypt's garbage collectors, the *zabbalin*—both Christians and Muslims working in the same trade—and describes their work and what a great difference the promo-



tion of their basic needs—housing, schools, health care—through governmental and non-governmental social programs has made to their lives and to their children's futures.

The Coptic pope, His Holiness Shenouda III, maintains a close contact with his people through his weekly public meetings held every Wednesday, which hundreds of Copts attend, and his closeness and accessibility clearly have a deep influence on how the Copts live and practice their religion.

I appreciate the work Claudia Wiens has done in photographing and writing this book, and I hope it will help people—especially Egyptians—to understand and appreciate some aspects of our life in Egypt.



Acknowledgments

The photographs in this book were taken between February and October 2001 during my extended travels in Egypt. I spent a lot of time researching the right places and the right time to visit. *Coptic Egypt* by Jill Kamil (AUC Press, 1990) and *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* by Otto F.A. Meinardus (AUC Press, 1999) were a great help in my research and in my understanding of customs and traditions related to historical backgrounds. The rest of 2001 I spent selecting from more than 1,500 photographs. I would like to thank Heiner Schmitz and Axel Wehrtmann, who both helped me a lot to separate the wheat from the chaff and to put my photographs in the right order. This also gives me the opportunity to thank other people whose help, at one time or another, is reflected in the outcome of this book, namely Manon Atta, Dominic Coldwell, Eli Farinha, Kees Hulsmann, Hendrik Malimann, Sabine Scheer, Antje Schimpf, and René Wenzel/designnbureau martin & wenzel, Leyla, and my mother.

Above all, I owe a great debt to all Copts who provided me with necessary information concerning when and where to go, to all who appear in my photographs, and to all who helped me to overcome expected and unexpected obstacles.

Finally I want to thank all the people who constantly supported and encouraged me to go on when I was about to give up because the way seemed so long and stony.

This project gave me a great opportunity to see different sides and sites of Egypt that I otherwise would never have made the effort to explore.



The Beginning of Christianity in Egypt

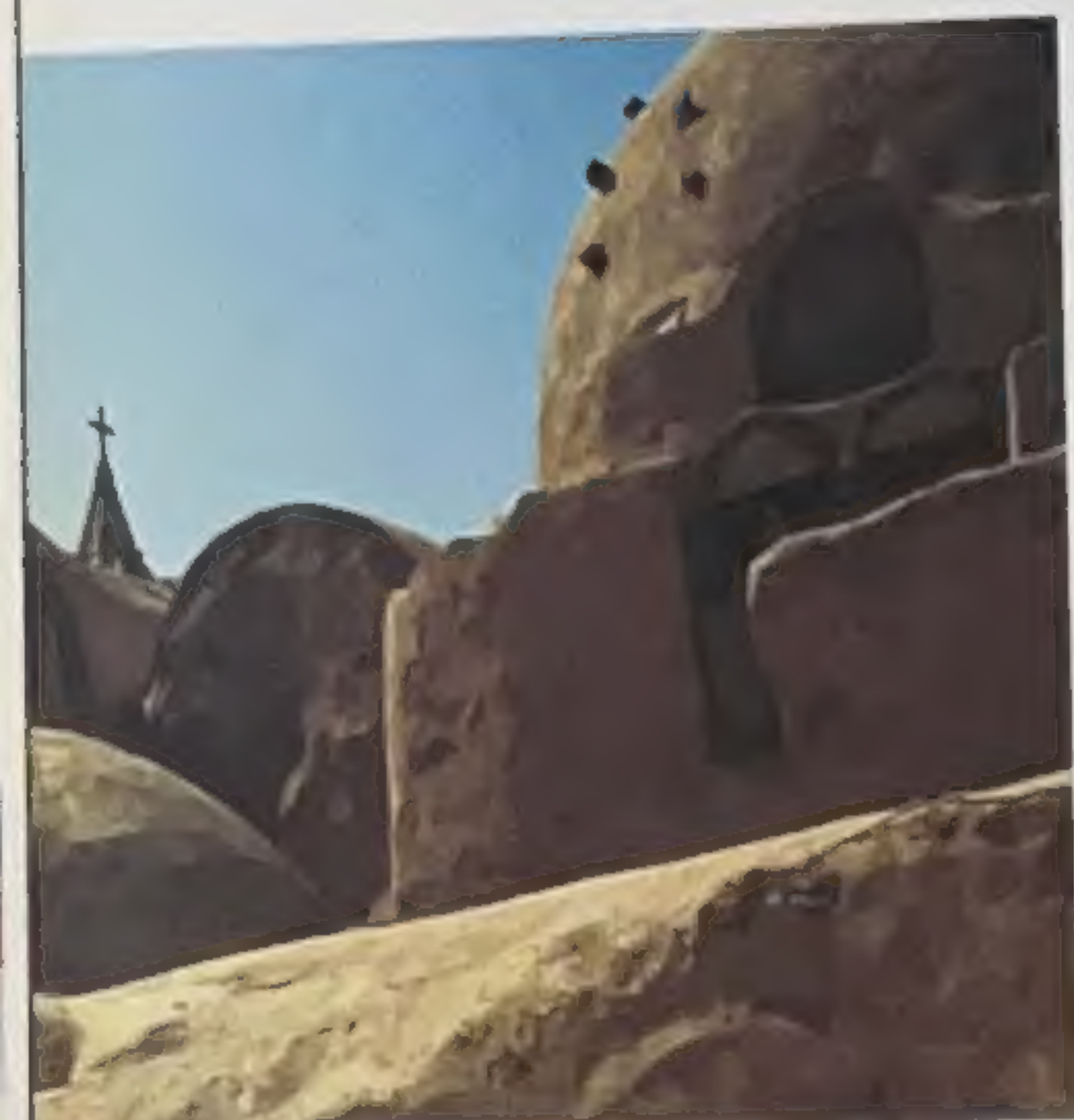
And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. (Matt. 2:13-15)

Thus began the flight of the Holy Family (including Salomé, the nanny) from Bethlehem to Egypt. The present literature differs as to the exact route the family took, because few written testimonies are extant. Experts agree, however, that the Family probably moved through Faras, Galilea, and Beersheva in present-day Israel, and from there entered Egypt, stopping in Tell al-Farama, Tell Basta, Musturud, Bilbays, Sammanud, al-Burullus, Sakha, Wadi al-Natrun, al-Qanatir, al-Matariya, Harat Zuwayla, Old Cairo, Maadi, Bahnasa, Gebel al-Tayr, Ashmunayn, Mallawi, Kom Maria, Dayrut, Qusiya, Mir, and Qusqam.

Although the exact duration of the Family's stay is not clear either, most sources speak of a period of between three and a half and four years.

During the journey, the young Jesus is said to have performed various miracles, curing the sick, resurrecting a number of people from death, and drawing water from the ground during periods of drought and famine.

Every time the Holy Family entered a temple, it is reported that the statues of pagan deities would collapse and shatter. Various sites on the Family's itinerary still feature churches and other sacred sites, including the monasteries of Deir al-Suryan, Deir Anba Bishoi, Deir Abu Maqar, and Deir al-Baramus in Wadi Natrun, Deir Abu Hinnis in Mallawi, and Deir al-Muharrag in Qusqam.



The Holy Family probably took the same route when they returned to Palestine, and it is reported that during their stay at a place where the Monastery of the Holy Virgin now stands, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream,

Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. (Matt. 2:20)

St. Mark the Evangelist first introduced Christianity to Egypt in the first century AD during the reign of the Roman emperor Claudius. Although no source mentions the exact dates of his visits, it is likely that he was in Egypt in AD 41/42 or perhaps 43/44, and perhaps again between 50 and 62. He was definitely there in 68, the year of his martyrdom.

St. Mark not only authored the oldest canonical Gospel, but also founded the Coptic Church. He was the first in an unbroken chain of 117 Coptic patriarchs. Legend has it that his first Egyptian convert was a cobbler in Alexandria. St. Mark converted and baptized the cobbler's entire family. Soon, the number of converts increased. At the same time, there were growing fears that Christians would outnumber the followers of the old gods. St. Mark was therefore imprisoned on Easter Sunday in 68. An angel appeared, promising him the crown of martyrdom. And so it happened. The following day, St. Mark was tortured and dragged through the streets of Alexandria until he died. That night, his disciples gathered to bury him in the church.

Despite persecution, Christianity quickly penetrated to the south, into Upper Egypt, because the spiritual climate of Egypt offered a ready basis for Christian belief. In part, Egyptians welcomed Christianity because of similarities with much older religious traditions. The popularity of the Virgin Mary undoubtedly stems from the similarity of her story to the myth of Isis, the pharaonic mother-goddess who protected her child, Horus, from enemies. The places where the Holy Family rested became hallowed sites.



Religion in Daily Life

People in Egypt like to exhibit their religious beliefs. In every store, juice bar, ironing shop, or commercial establishment run by Copts, tokens of Christianity are on display. Stickers of saints are stuck to walls and crosses decorate rooms. Even taxi drivers embellish their cars with stickers of Jesus and the saints. Muslims do not show pictures because Islam frowns on depictions of God or the Prophet, but they do use embellished script like "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) to demonstrate their piety. Egyptians are proud of their religion and define themselves through it.

Every Wednesday evening, thousands of listeners flock to St. Mark's Cathedral in the district of Abbasiya to attend a two-hour sermon headed by the Coptic pope Shenouda III. Members of the audience write down questions, which are collected before the sermon gets under way. First, Pope Shenouda signs posters and books. He then talks about a recent religious event or problem and, finally, he reads out the questions and answers them. This weekly event contributes to a close relationship between the people and church. This is an attempt to make official religion more understandable for the ordinary people. The pope is a figurehead, but an accessible one, which makes it easy for people to identify with him.

Pages 6 and 7:
Shops in Abbasiya

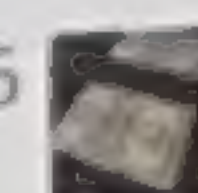
Page 8:
A souvenir shop in Abbasiya

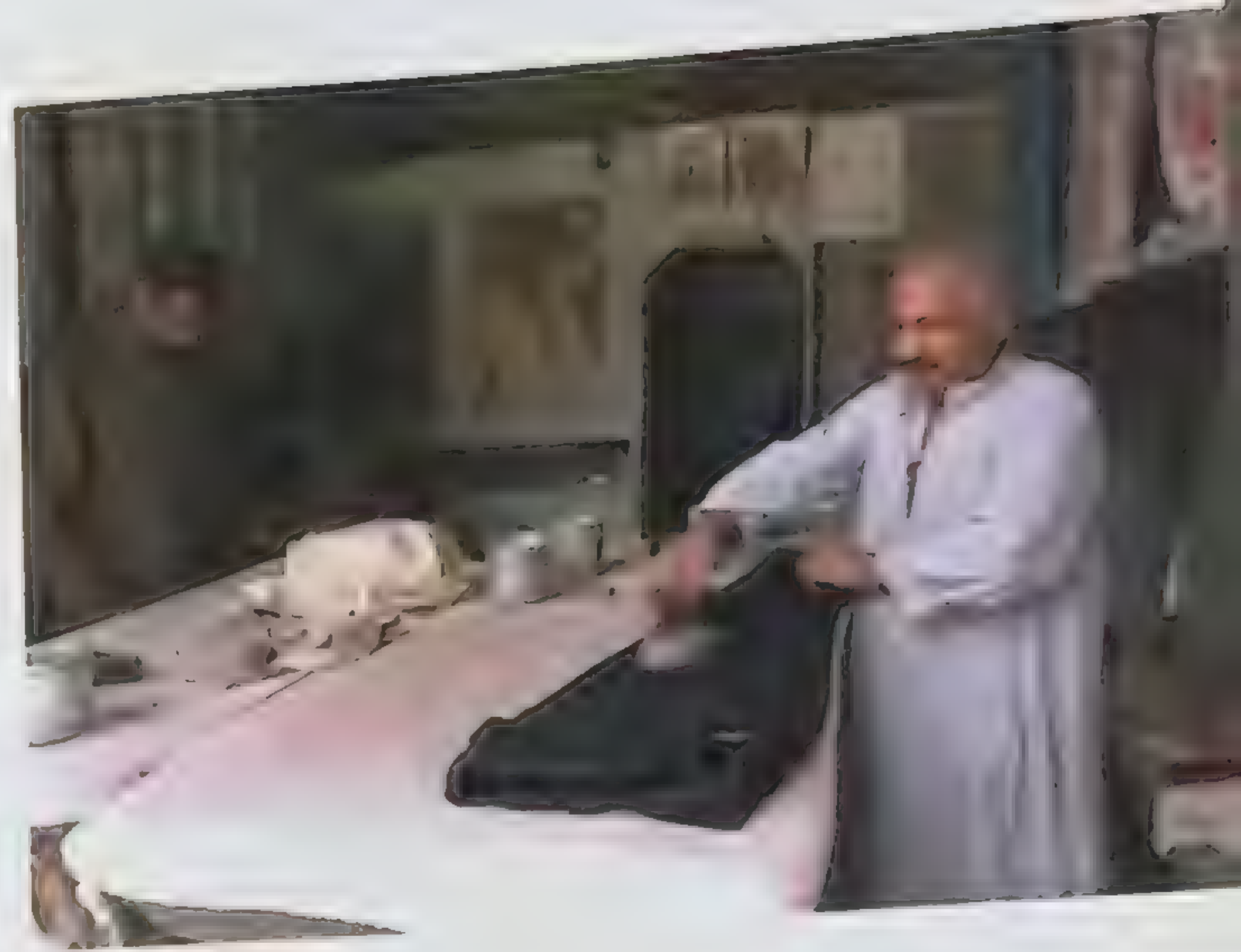
Page 9:
A shop close to Ramsis

Page 10:
Coptic Cairo

Page 11:
The souvenir shop at St. Mark's
Cathedral in Abbasiya

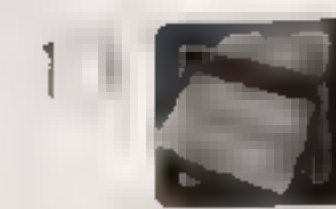
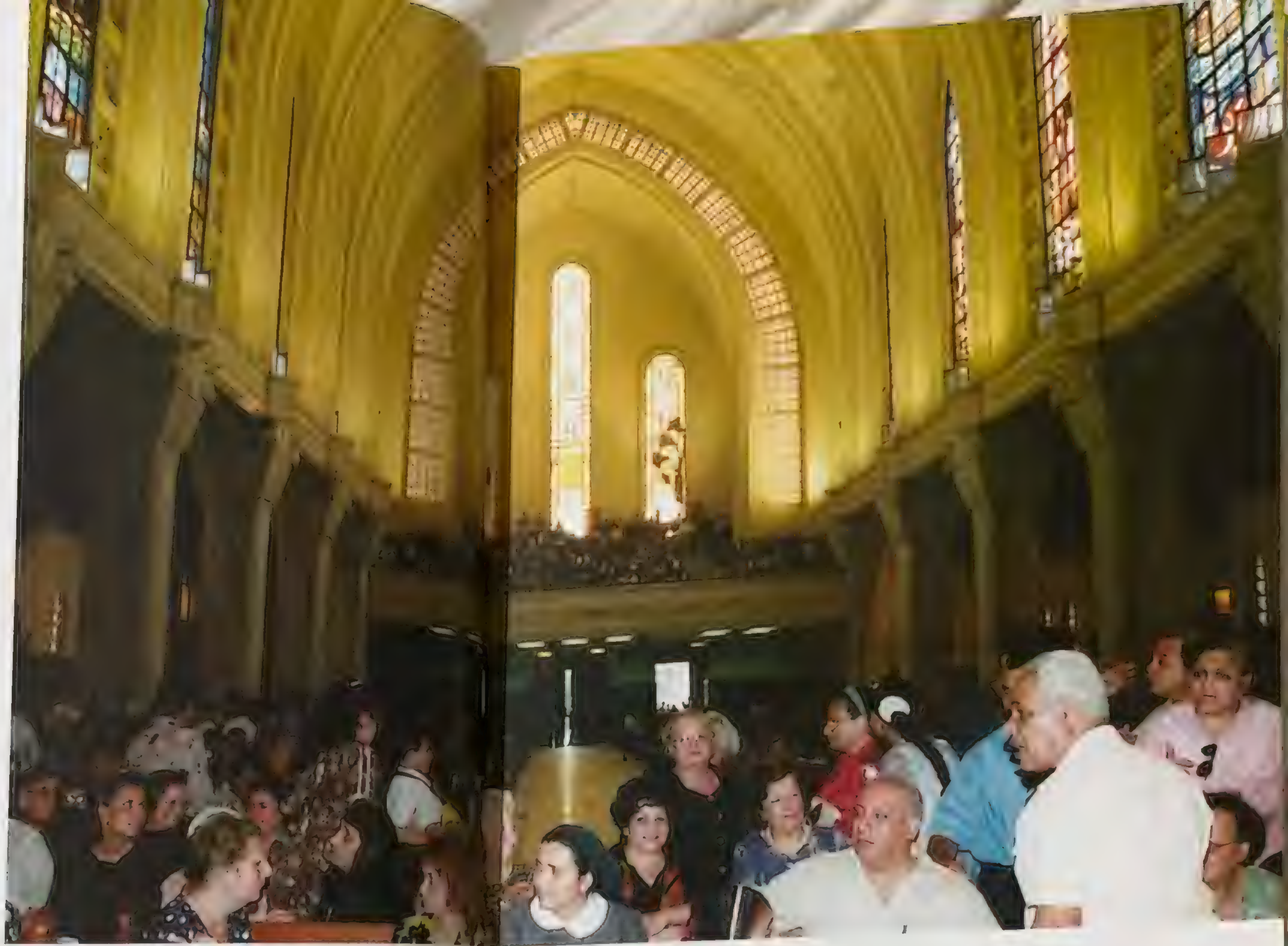
Pages 12-15:
The Wednesday sermon at
St. Mark's Cathedral













The Muqattam Community

The garbage collectors of Cairo—the *zabbalin*—are largely Copts. The *zabbalin* keep pigs because they consume organic waste, and it is because Muslims consider pigs to be impure animals that the job is done mainly by Copts. Many of them migrated a long time ago from rural areas to the capital in search of better employment prospects. When lucrative jobs failed to materialize, the migrants saw no other option but to join the swelling ranks of the city's garbage collectors. To improve hygienic conditions, the pig-keeping is being moved out of the populated areas of Cairo to areas outside the city.

For over fifty years the *zabbalin* have collected private and public garbage in Cairo. With small trucks or donkey carts, the men and boys drive from house to house in the early hours of the morning collecting garbage and transporting it to one of the five garbage areas in Cairo: Muqattam, Tura, Mu'tamadiya, Baragil, and Ezbit al Nakhla. Altogether there are about 65,000 people in Cairo involved in garbage activities like collecting, sorting, and recycling. About 20,000 of them live in Muqattam, at the foot of the mountain of the same name, near the famous citadel. When the men come home in the morning with the garbage, the sorting work begins for the women and children. They divide it into heaps of glass, paper, metal for recycling, and into another pile of organic waste for pig food. The non-organic waste is sold to recycling plants.

The inhabitants of these areas live under difficult conditions but these have been improved during the last few years by the efforts of NGOs and the government. Now there is drinking water, electricity, and a functioning sewage system, and the medical care has improved a great deal. In Muqattam there are several elemen-



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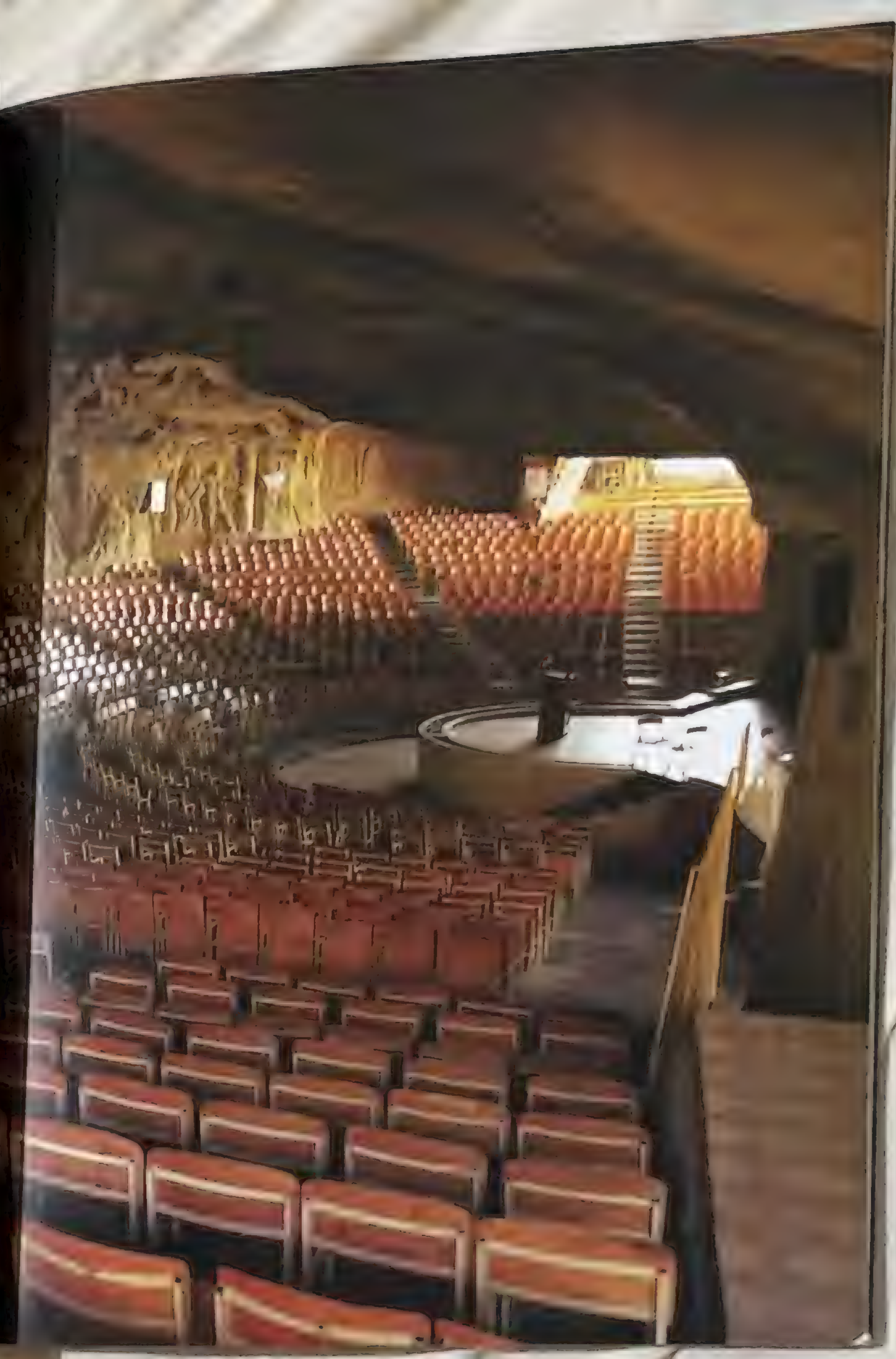














Mulids and Pilgrimages

Mulids, 'birthdays' of saints, martyrs, and holy men, are celebrated in Egypt by both Muslims and Copts. Christian mulids are celebrated by many people as annual pilgrimages. Mulids belong to the folk religion which includes many aspects of personal and social life. The religious attitude and traditions of the masses differ greatly from the attitude and traditions of the official church, although there are some overlaps. Most of the rituals of the folk religion have their roots in the religious heritage of pharaonic Egypt. The religious attitude of Egyptians has always been determined by eschatology, a factor that doubtlessly eased the acceptance of Christianity. Copts believed that people were living for their reception in paradise, and they therefore received the death of a saint or a martyr as a birthday. Only in the fourth century was it transformed into a burial. Until modern times, Copts see the saint's martyrdom as a 'second birth' into Eternal Life. Many people continued to follow the traditions of their pharaonic ancestors, and pharaonic deities were replaced by saints and martyrs, who became objects of veneration and worship. After a short time every settlement had its own patron saints and martyrs, for whom shrines and tombs were erected in which their bones were kept as objects of veneration and prayer. Every saint and martyr was related to miraculous stories that suited their martyrdom. Saints and martyrs were a more tangible and real object of religious identification than the abstract dogmas of the official religion.

Soon there were annual mulids at the tombs and shrines of saints. These took place in monasteries and churches and other holy sites. An important aspect of a mulid is the miraculous events



that are related to it. These phenomena have a long-standing history and are expected to happen regularly. They are the divine proof of the holiness of the feast.

These miracles are of two types. There are those that pertain to single individuals, such as the granting of fertility to sterile women, the curing of mentally or emotionally sick people, exorcism, or the restoration of lost or stolen belongings. And there are the apparitions, such as lights or the shape of the Holy Virgin in form of a bright light, as occurred several times in August 2000 at St. Mark's church in Asyut. The lights came as a series between the church towers and they came together to form the shape of the Virgin Mary. Many believers testify that they have seen apparitions at holy sites. Many mentally or emotionally sick people, sterile women, and other pilgrims attend *mulids* hoping to be healed or blessed.

Most *mulids* are not only serious events but also occasions of much fun and joy. The annual ten-day *mulid* at Deir al-Muharrag in Middle Egypt resembles a huge picnic or a funfair. The music is loud, people dance, and there are merchants selling kitschy Taiwanese items, nuts, fruits, and pictures of saints. Not to be missed are the tattoo artists who tattoo the Coptic cross onto the wrists of Copts. They also draw bigger pictures of saints on arms and shoulders. It is estimated that 50,000 people make the pilgrimage to Deir al-Muharrag every year. For the poor among the Copts, which is a high percentage of the Copts in Middle Egypt, a *mulid* is often the only holiday they can afford. They pitch their tents around the monastery for several days and visit the churches to pray, say intercessions, and touch shrines and pictures of saints and martyrs in order to attain cure and blessings. Many families bring sheep and goats as sacrifices. These are slaughtered in the monastery's butchery, blessed by a priest or monk, and then shared.

A *mulid* is also a good occasion for baptizing babies. It is common for the monks to baptize several hundred babies during a *mulid* that lasts a few days. Baptism is the first and most important sacrament, and without it, no other sacrament can be admin-

istered; it is a prerequisite for salvation and entry into the kingdom of God, according to Jesus' words: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Baptism is the sacrament in which the recipient is regenerated through triple immersion into water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and thus united with Christ and the body of the Church. Babies should be baptized as soon as possible once they are eighty days old (for girls) or forty days old (for boys), the prescribed periods of time after giving birth that a woman is considered impure and is not allowed to participate in religious acts such as Holy Communion or Baptism. In cases of illness, or if there is a fear that the baby might not survive this period, somebody else can take it to church. After the baby has been immersed three times he or she then receives thirty-two crosses of oil on the skin.

Copts venerate many martyrs but only a few saints. The Holy Virgin holds the strongest position and receives the most veneration. Thirty-two celebrations are held each year in her honor.

Another reason for pilgrimages is the long and persistent tradition that supports the Bible story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15). Many feasts take place at the sites where the Holy Family are believed to have rested during their flight. One of these commemorations takes place every June 1 in the area of Deir Abu Hinnis in Middle Egypt. The bishop of Mallawi, two other bishops, and several clerical dignitaries cross the Nile in a splendidly decorated sailing boat. The crossing symbolizes the trip of the Holy Family on the Nile. Thousands of believers follow the sailing boat to the other river bank. From there a procession goes to the peak of Mount Kom Maria, singing joyful sacred songs and passing churches and Deir Abu Hinnis along the way. Kom Maria is famous for granting fertility to sterile women. Now and then one can see a woman rolling down the mountain praying for fertility. On the top of the mountain a tent is pitched for the clerical dignitaries and servants who commemorate the visit of the Holy Family to this area. A ceremony with singing children

and speeches lasts a couple of hours. Thousands of pilgrims assemble outside the festivity tent to take part in the commemoration celebration

Another feast in honor of the Holy Family and especially of the Holy Virgin is held at the Holy Virgin Mary Church on Gebel al-Tayr (Mountain of Birds) in Middle Egypt. According to tradition this is the site where Mary feared for Jesus' safety because a huge rock threatened to fall down on them. But Jesus extended his hand and kept the rock away. It is said that Jesus left the imprint of his hand behind. Pilgrims come from near and far, cross the Nile, and gather in a joyful procession with singing and drumming.

Another *mulid*, which lasts fifteen days and which is very crowded, takes place in August at Deir al-Adra (Monastery of the Holy Virgin) in Durunka, 10 kilometers from Asyut. A huge funfair (there is even a merry-go-round) is located at the bottom of the hill. In August 2001 the *mulid* attracted more than 20,000 people because of light apparitions on several evenings. The believers were convinced that heaven was talking to the people.

Page 37 *Mulid* around
Deir al-Adra Durunka

Pages 38-46 *Mulid* near Deir
Abu Hinnis Mallaw

Pages 47-57 *Mulid* around
Deir al Muharraq

Pages 58-69 *Mulid* around
Deir al Adra Durunka

Pages 64-65 Bishop Michael
addressing the crowds waiting
for apparitions at Deir al-Adra
Durunka

Pages 70-75 Baptism at Deir
al Muharraq and Deir al Adra

















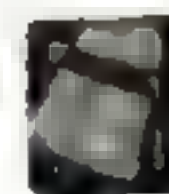


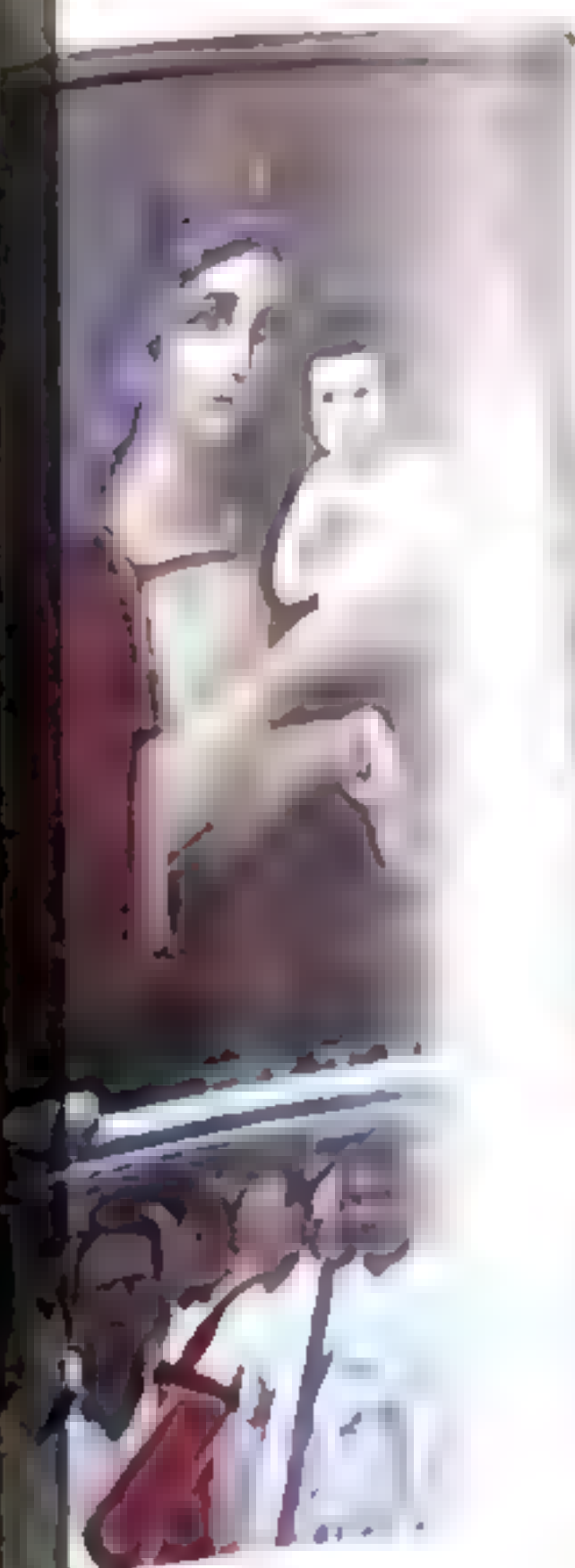
















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البطل
اليوناني
كوسنا

كوسنا

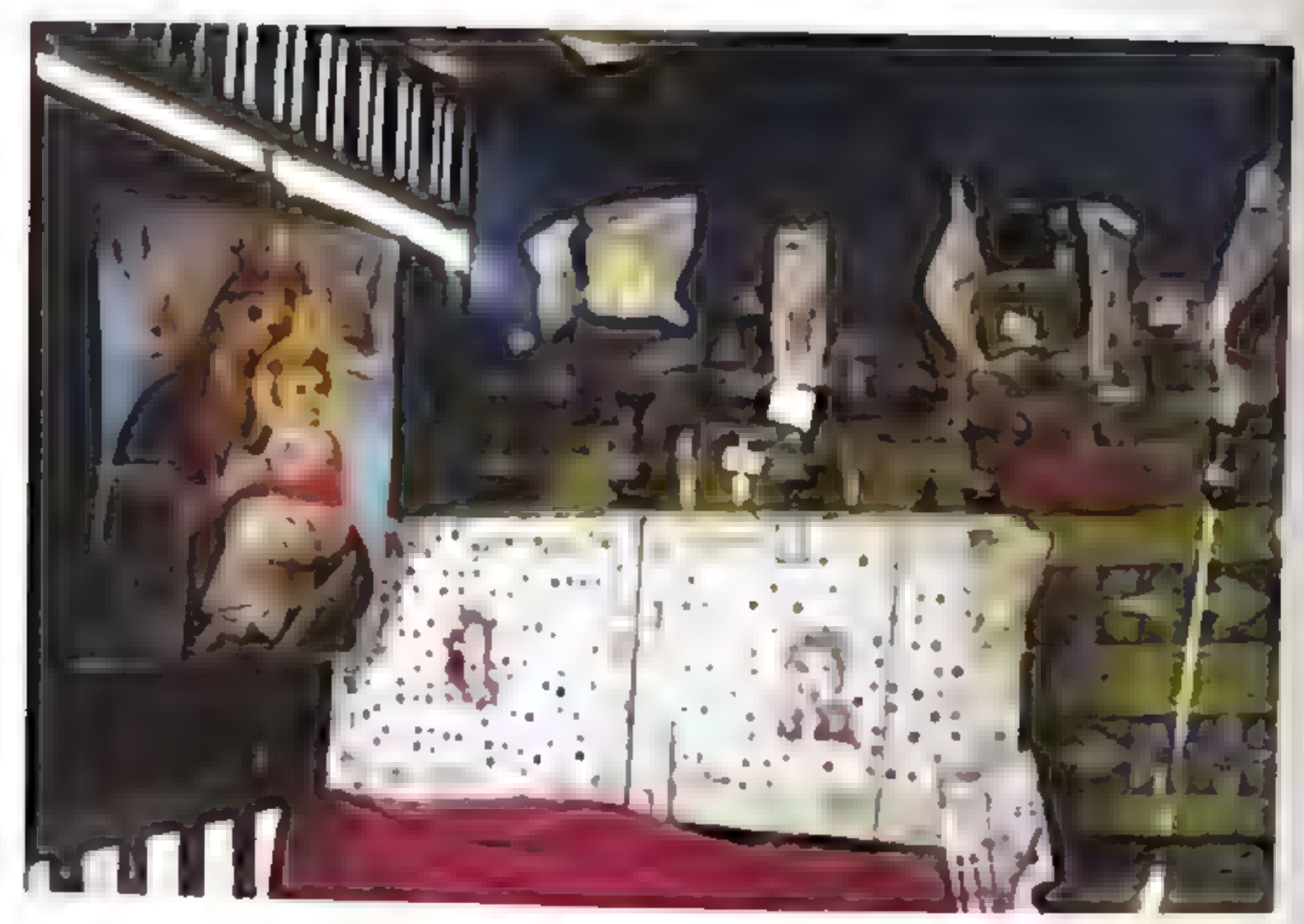
بسم الله
ما شاء الله
لا قوة
الا بالله

SALTO MORALE

منا نيقولا پيدس (كوسنا)

اكر ومان مته

The sign features several illustrations: a person on a motorcycle at the top right, a person on a bicycle in the center, and a person on a motorcycle on the right side. There are also flags and the Olympic rings logo.














The Sacrament of Marriage

 The Coptic wedding is also called the 'Coronation Ceremony' because the priest crowns the couple for a short while during the ceremony. Normally, the wedding takes place after an extended period of engagement, in which the couple gets to know each other better. This also holds true for arranged marriages, which are still quite common. The wedding usually takes place in a church—it is only under exceptional circumstances now that the wedding is held at home, but only a few decades ago it was customary to celebrate the marriage at the groom's house.

The bride and the groom are accompanied separately to the church, which is decorated with flowers. They sit on gilded chairs on a small dais. Facing the couple is a table that carries the New Testament, a golden cross, the wedding rings, and incense. The clergy are dressed in festive habits and accompany the ceremony with joyful chants and the sound of cymbals. The priest anoints the couple's wrists and foreheads with sacred oil. Afterwards he briefly places the crowns, which bear a Coptic cross inscribed with the phrase "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace," on their heads. The priest utters the words "Crown them with glory and honor. O Father, Amen. Bless them, O only begotten Son, Amen. Sanctify them, O Holy Spirit, Amen." The couple exchange rings; the priest reads verses from the Bible, and, at the end, the congregation recites a prayer.

Wedding parties are held at home, in hotels, or at clubs according to the families' financial circumstances. Coptic couples usually marry for life. Only under exceptional circumstances, such as adultery or a spouse's conversion to Islam, is divorce acceptable.

Pages 78–85

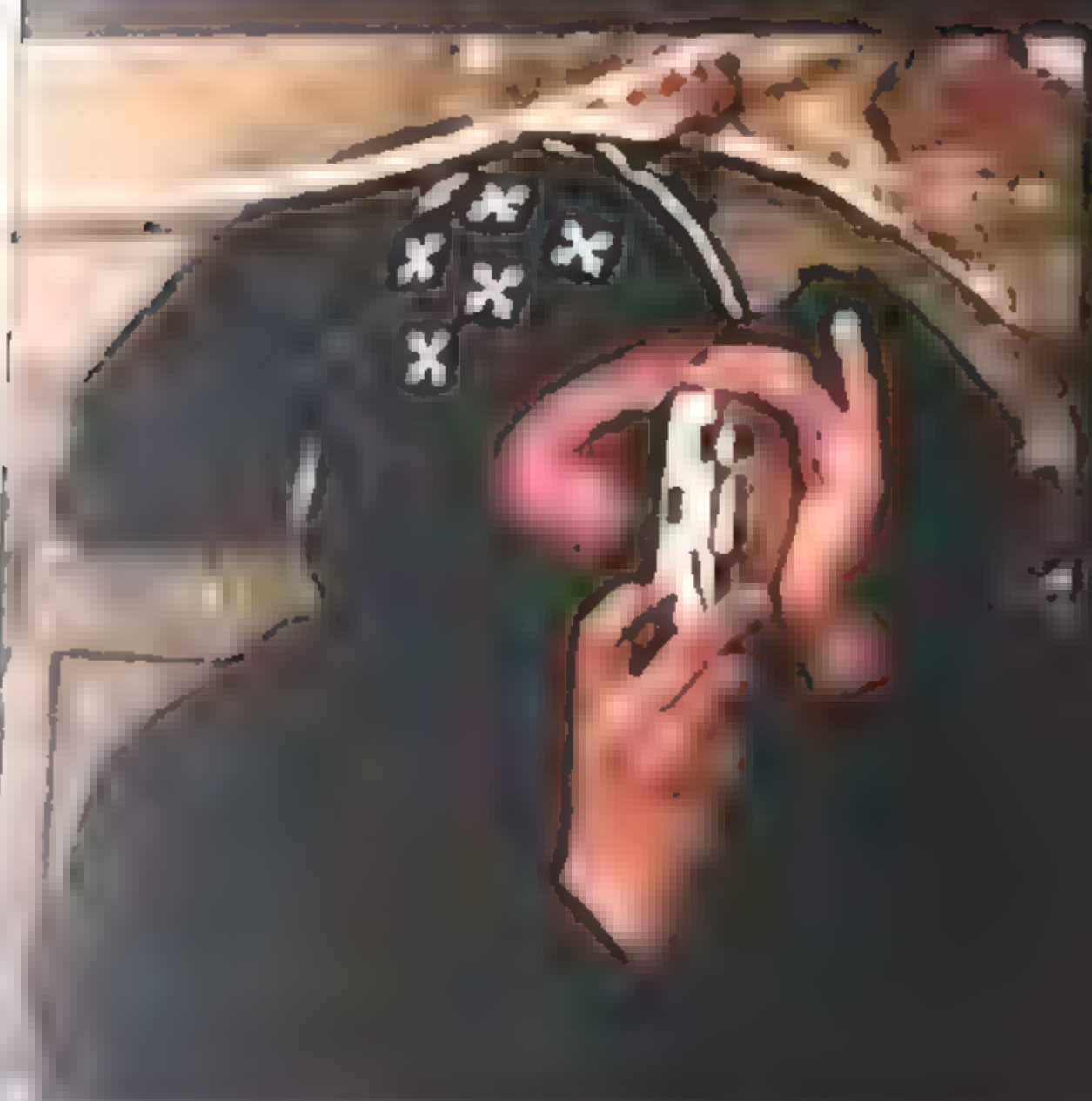
Wedding ceremony in
a church in Shubra











Monastic Life

In the third century, thousands of ascetics started to live in small groups separated from the secular world. By the example of the Desert Fathers Paul and Antony, hermits found the solitude that they desired deep in the desert. St. Paul (228-343) and St. Antony (251-356) lived in complete solitude in the desert west of the Red Sea. Their lives were based on meditation and prayer. Because of this ascetic way of life, they became spiritual leaders and the founders of the monastic movement. Thousands of people followed their example. St. Antony introduced two principles, which appeared to him in an apparition: work and prayer. In addition, he introduced the monastic garb, a garment of flax fastened by a leather belt, and a goat-skin cloak for colder days.

Most of the hermits lived in caves and came together only on Wednesdays and Sundays for spiritual guidance. Ascetic leaders were chosen from simple origins, like St. Paul, but also from higher social classes like St. Antony. When rich landowners decided to abandon their worldly possessions to become hermits, they received special respect and were regarded as having a certain spiritual power and a close relationship with the divine. The Desert Fathers became heroes to whom a divine power was attributed.

In the fourth century, shortly after St. Antony's death, Deir Anba Antunyus was built in his honor close to the cave where he had spent his life. The monastery of Deir Anba Bula was founded not far from Deir Anba Antunyus at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century in honor of St. Paul. Nowadays both monasteries celebrate the anniversaries of the two saints. The monks of the one monastery always come to join the feast of the

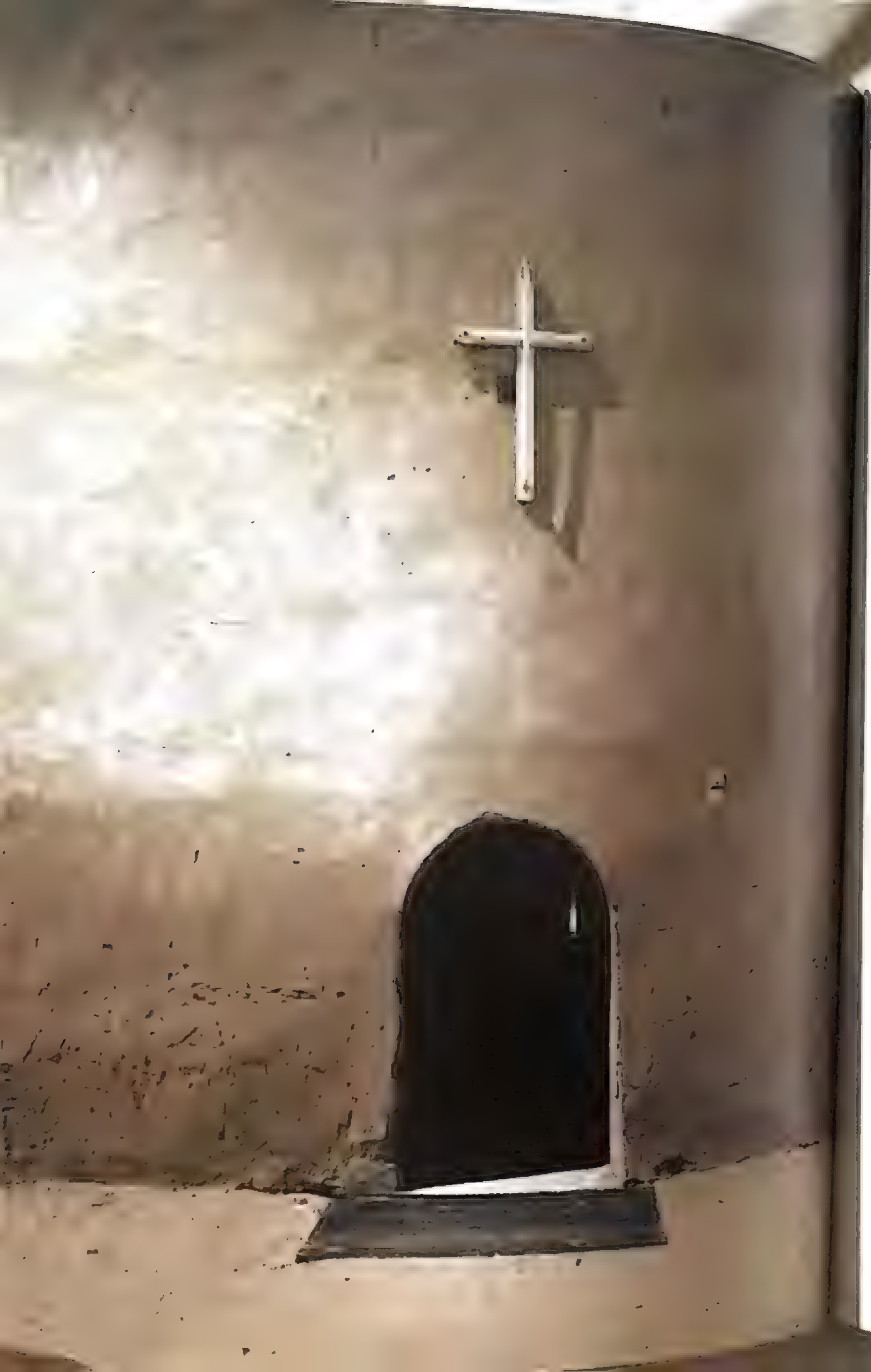


The feast of St. Paul is held in the old underground church where his remains are buried. The monks play music and sing songs about the story of Paul. Later in the evening a procession through the monastery's courtyard takes place. Thousands of people who come especially for this event, wait to touch the statue of Paul to receive blessings.

As Christianity spread and Christianity declined over the centuries, monasteries lost their popularity. A Christian revival began in the nineteenth century. It gathered force in the 1940s with the start of the Sunday School movement. Nowadays, Pope Tawadros II, head of Egypt's Orthodox Church, supports church activities to attract the interest of the youth in religion and the church. Many young people can try monastic life during their school holidays. In the last fifty years, the number of monks has increased from about 1,000 to almost 2,000. Also, the number of applicants for the priesthood and for convents has gone up. The reasons for this are not clear. Many Copts attribute the church's popularity to the growth of a powerful Christian youth movement. Others say that young people find many roads closed, but that they need to find themselves, and that they find this possible in monasteries and churches.

Monastic lifestyle is modest and daily life revolves around work, prayer, and meditation. Food is simple and consists mainly of bread, beans, and other vegetables. Many monasteries aim for self-reliance. They rent land to farmers in order to earn money, or they sell their own produce. Deir Abu Mina, near Alexandria, is one of the richest monasteries in Egypt. It supports itself through fish and chicken farming, the cultivation of olives and vegetables, and renting land to farmers, and it even has its own microchip laboratory. The monasteries of Middle Egypt, such as Deir al-Muharraq are also wealthy.





















Easter

Easter is the most important Coptic holiday. It surpasses Christmas both in importance and in the scope of celebration. Because the Coptic calendar differs from the western one, Easter is generally celebrated later than in the west. Copts fast 55 rather than 40 days before Easter. In the Coptic tradition, the faithful refrain from eating animal products such as eggs, milk, and fish. Copts also need to abstain from drink, coffee and alcohol during the fast. Just like Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan, they may only eat between sunset and sunrise. Children, pregnant women, the elderly, and the sick are excused from the fast.

The Holy Easter week, *Usbu' al-alam* (Week of Pain), is a period of prayer and contemplation commemorating Jesus' last days on earth. It starts with Palm Sunday (*Ahad al-Za'f*) and finishes with Easter Sunday. On Palm Sunday, people visit their relatives graves and remember the dead. Priests conduct mass in church and lead processions carrying palm leaves woven in the shape of crosses. They also swing incense burners. Outside church, artisans braid palm leaves and sell them to people to hang over the front doors of their houses to ward off evil spirits. On Thursday, Copts commemorate Christ washing the feet of the disciples. On Good Friday (*al-Gum'a al-Hazina*) the altars are draped with black sheets to mourn Jesus' crucifixion. Good Saturday is called the Saturday of Light (*Sabt al-Nur*), because of the miracle that reportedly illuminated the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Some locations also hold candlelight processions.

At midnight on Saturday, churches across the country hold mass. Pope Shenouda III conducts mass in St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo.



Thousands of people come to the cathedral. Clerics dress in splendid robes. The pope himself wears an ornate robe and a crown.

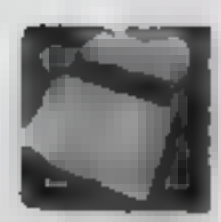
The ceremony of opening the churches' inner sanctuary symbolically evokes the removal of the stone that sealed Jesus' grave. The processions led by a priest holding an icon of Jesus circumambulate the sanctuary.

The spectators attending mass get very excited when the pope blesses them to offer his blessings, not least because the papal blessing is thought to convey healing powers. The sermon is usually translated into sign language. It ends, several hours later, with the Holy Communion.

These celebrations resemble the festivities of the Easter season, but are smaller in scope. The Coptic Christmas is celebrated on January 7.







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CLAUDIA YVONNE WIENS has spent more than four years in Egypt working on photographic projects.

YOUSRIYA LOZA SAWIRIS is the secretary general of the Sawiris Foundation for Social Development.





Coptic Life in Egypt



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